Subtle ways of God Almighty in maintaining righteousness

Karanam Lakshminarayana Ramakumar

Our epics Ramayanam, Maha Bharatam and maha Bhagavatam are full of instances to elaborate and explain righteousness. They also dwell in detail as to how to understand Dharma, Justice, Righteousness and subtle ways and nuances of interpretation of what constitutes these qualities. Quite often we come across a phrase “Dharmasukshma”.

Interpretation of Dharma or righteousness of an event occurred, action, reaction, response or behaviour of an individual, at gross level may seem correct and justifiable. But at microlevel, there seem to be multi-layers of interpretation of these events occurred, action, reaction, response or behaviour of individuals leading to the conclusion that what seemed to be correct at gross level need not be at microlevel (‘Dharmasukshma’)

There is a beautiful verse in Aranya Kanda about Sri Rama’s righteousness and his adherence to Dharma. When Ravana approaches Maricha seeking Maricha’s help in abducting Sita Devi and asks Maricha to be a wonderful golden deer dappled with silver dots and roam in front of Sita Devi in Rama's hermitage. Seeing the deer, Sita Devi will ask her husband and Lakshmana to capture the deer (Maricha) and the deer should lure them away from their dwelling so that Ravana could abduct Sita Devi. On hearing this, Maricha says:

रामो विग्रहवान्धर्मः साधुः सत्यपराक्रमः

राजा सर्वस्य लोकस्य देवानां मघवानिवः (Aranya Kanda Sarga 37, Verse 13)

"Ramo Vigrahavan Dharmah" means "Rama is the embodiment of Dharma" or "Rama is righteousness personified". This description and the idea of Dharmasukshma are nicely captured in the discussion between Sita Devi and Sri Rama. During the exile, Rishis in Dandakaranya implore Sri Rama to protect them from the cruel deeds of demons. Sri Rama promises to kill the demons and protect the rishis and their daily rituals. Hearing this, Sita Devi says:

अयं धर्मस्सुसूक्ष्मेण विधिना प्राप्यते महान्।

निवृत्तेन तु शक्योऽयं व्यसनात्कामजादिह।।3.9.2 ।।

This great path of dharma you are following now can be attained only through subtle means by one free from addiction born of passion.

त्रीण्येव व्यसनान्यत्र कामजानि भवन्त्युत।

मिथ्यावाक्यं परमकं तस्माद्गुरुतरावुभौ।

परदाराभिगमनं विना वैरं च रौद्रता।।3.9.3 ।।

There are three kinds of vices born out of lust. First, speaking untruth, second, having sexual relation with others' wives and third, resorting to violence with no enmity. The latter two vices are of serious nature.

तृतीयं यदिदं रौद्रं परप्राणाभिहिंसनम्।।3.9.9 ।।

निर्वैरं क्रियते मोहात्तच्च ते समुपस्थितम्।

You are a victim to the third vice namely showing violence without cause for enmity

प्रतिज्ञातस्त्वया वीर दण्डकारण्यवासिनाम्।।3.9.10 ।।

ऋषीणां रक्षणार्थाय वधस्संयति रक्षसाम्।

O valiant one, you have promised to kill the demons in the battle, in order to protect the sages residing in the Dandaka forest.

क्षत्रियाणामपि धनुर्हुताशस्येन्धनानि च।।3.9.15 ।।

समीपतस्स्थितं तेजो बलमुच्छ्रयते भृशम्।

A bow in the hand of a kshatriya is like fuel to fire. It surely swells his strength and his brilliance.

न कथंचन सा कार्या गृहीत धनुषा त्वया |

बुद्धिः वैरम् विना हन्तुम् राक्षसान् दण्डक आश्रितान् |

अपराधम् विना हन्तुम् लोको वीर न कामये || 3-9-25 ||

The Danavas in Dandakaranya don't have any enmity with you. Improper is that thought of yours to wield your bow to kill the demons without any enmity. O valiant one I do not desire that any one should be killed without incurring any offence.

क्षत्रियाणाम् तु वीराणाम् वनेषु नियतात्मनाम् |

धनुषा कार्यम् एतावत् आर्तानाम् अभिरक्षणम् || 3-9-26 ||

If the Rishis performing their sacred rituals and penance are subjected to torture by the Danavas it is the duty of valiant Kshatriyas with bow and arrow to kill the Danavas and protect the sufferers.

क्व च शस्त्रम् क्व च वनम् क्व च क्षात्रम् तपः क्व च |

व्याविद्धम् इदम् अस्माभिः देश धर्मः तु पूज्यताम् || 3-9-27 ||

Carrying peaceful activities and having weapons at the same time are incompatible and don't go together. We are here for living peacefully in these forests and let us not indulge in valiant warrior activities.

स्त्रीचापलादेतदुदाहृतं मे धर्मं च वक्तुं तव कस्समर्थः।

विचार्य बुद्ध्या तु सहानुजेन यद्रोचते तत्कुरु मा चिरेण।।3.9.34।।

I told you all this out of feminine fickleness. Who can guide you in the ways of dharma? After carefully deliberating the matter with your brother you may act according to your wish. Let there be no delay.

Thus, Sita Devi's requests seem to be reasonable and within the principles of Dharma. In a nutshell, she says:

(i) We are here to spend our lives peacefully in forests and let us stick with this

(ii) Without enmity, it is not desirable to kill anybody.

Having heard these words spoken by Sita Devi who was devoted to her husband, replied Sri Rama who was firm in righteousness.

किं तु वक्ष्याम्यहं देवि त्वयैवोक्तमिदं वचः।

क्षत्रियैर्धार्यते चापो नार्तशब्दो भवेदिति।।3.10.3।।

Devi, you have already stated, when a kshatriya holds a bow there will be no cry of distress. (it means you approve of my holding a bow)

काले काले च निरता नियमैर्विविधैर्वने।

भक्ष्यन्ते राक्षसैर्भीमैर्नरमांसोपजीविभिः।।3.10.6।।

The sages engrossed in various austerities in the forest have been victims to the dreadful demons living on human flesh.

ते भक्ष्यमाणा मुनयो दण्डकारण्य वासिनः ।।3.10.7 ।।

अस्मान् अभ्यवपद्य इति माम् ऊचुर् द्विज सत्तमाः ।

The sages dwelling in Dandakaranya are being eaten away by Danavas, requested me to come to their rescue.

मया चैतद्वचश्श्रुत्वा कात्स्न्र्येन परिपालनम्।

ऋषीणां दण्डकारण्ये संश्रुतं जनकात्मजे।।3.10.17।।

O daughter of Janaka, on hearing the words of the sages I promised to undertake the entire protection of sages of the Dandakaranya.

संश्रुत्य च न शक्ष्यामि जीवमानः प्रतिश्रवम्।

मुनीनामन्यथा कर्तुं सत्यमिष्टं हि मे सदा।।3.10.18।।

Having promised the sages, I cannot do otherwise as long as I have life in me. To me truth is always dear.

अप्यहं जीवितं जह्यां त्वां वा सीते सलक्ष्मणाम्।

न तु प्रतिज्ञां संश्रुत्य ब्राह्मणेभ्यो विशेषतः।।3.10.19।।

O Sita I may forfeit my life, forsake even Lakshmana and you but will not break the promise made specially to the brahminsl

The above sloka spells very clearly Sri Rama's approach to the concept of righteousness. He would not hesitate to sacrifice his near and dear for keeping his promise.

Another instance of where this Dharmasukshma has a role is in Kishkinda Kanda. All of us know the story of Vali and Sugreeva, the Vanara brothers. Vali is the son of God Indra while Sugreeva is the son of Sun God. Briefly, Vali banished his brother Sugreeva from Kishkindha due to a misunderstanding when he believed Sugreeva had betrayed him by attempting to usurp the throne. After Sugreeva mistakenly thought Vali was killed by a demon in a cave, he sealed the entrance, returns to Kishkinda and requested by others, reluctantly took over the kingdom. After killing the demon, Vali returns to Kishkindha, gets enraged at seeing Sugreeva on the throne, seizes Sugreeva's wife Ruma and banishes Sugreeva to exile. Sugreeva, along with Hanuman and other trusted supporters, makes Rishyamuka mountain as his abode.

Sri Rama and Lakshmana, in search of Sita Devi reach Rishyamuka mountain and at the behest of Sugreeva, Hanuman visits Sri Rama and enquires about the reason of their presence there. Later Hanuman brings them to Sugreeva. Sri Rama and Sugreeva take owe to become friends over sacred fire. Both of them share their life happenings. Sri Rama promises to kill Vali and help him reclaim the kingdom and wife Ruma. In return, Sugreeva promises to send his followers in search of Sita Devi and on finding her, help Sri Rama in the battle against Ravana. Thus, they have a mutual cooperation agreement.

Vali's killing is a puzzle from the viewpoint of dharma. In 17th Sarga of Kishkinda Kanda, on the death bed, Vali seeks Sri Rama's answers by asking him why did Sri Rama decide to kill him when (i) he was not his enemy, (ii) he was not directly facing and fighting him, (iii) he did not commit any wrong doing to Sri Rama, (iv) he was fighting another person, (v) he is an arboreal feeding on fruits and leaves , no justification for killing and many such logical questions. Vali positions himself as a responsible, law-abiding ruler, an ordinary citizen, and a Vanara and posed all the questions to Sri Rama.

Sri Rama's pointwise answers are mentioned in 18th Sarga of Kishkinda Kanda. He also addresses Vali in the same way as the questions indicated. The crucial one, perhaps is "*while Sugreeva is still alive, you with your habit of sinful acts have lustily misbehaved with Sugreeva's wife Ruma, who should be counted as your daughter-in-law*" and justifies that he did not violate any dharma in killing Vali. As Kishkindha is a part of Ikshvaku kingdom, Vali, if he has committed any sin, he is punishable. Also, it is not a crime to kill animals by hiding oneself as being done during hunting. Another important thing to recall is Sri Rama's promise to Sugreeva that he would kill Vali and Sri Rama tell this also to Vali.

It is worthwhile to analyse Sri Rama's actions in killing Danavas in Dandakaranya and killing Vali. The action of Sri Rama in both the instances is due to his promises made to Rishis in Dandakaranya and to Sugreeva in Kishkinda Kanda. But the difference is in Dandakaranya he killed Danavas fighting them face to face whereas he killed Vali hiding behind a tree and nor fighting him. It is really a challenge to understand and interpret the fine subtleties of dharma in both the cases.

There are many explanations in literature given out by erudite scholars justifying Sri Rama's action. Without going to those details, I put forward the following explanation:

Sri Rama had to kill Vali because of mutual understanding between him and Sugreeva. Sugreeva promised to help Sri Rama in finding Sita Devi by sending his troupes across all the directions and upon finding Sita Devi, help Sri Rama in fighting Ravana. Had Sri Rama not killed Vali, there is no way Ramayana could have proceeded. Infringement in observing dharma notwithstanding, one can take a broader outlook that for greater good, slight violations on the path to reach final destination may be in order.

My further understanding is as follows: No doubt Sri Rama justified his action by answering all the questions raised by Vali. He, being the Almighty and custodian of righteousness (Ramo Vigrahavan Dharmah: Sri Rama is embodiment of Dharma).

We come across a very interesting episode In Maha Bharatha. Sri Krishna supported Pandavas in the battle against Kauravas. Specifically, he was the charioteer for Arjuna who is Indra's son (just like Vali in Ramayana) and helped Arjuna in killing Karna who is son of Sun God (just like Sugreeva in Ramayana). These two contrasting situations in Ramayana and Maha Bharatha, whether are coincidental or whether the God Almighty did this knowingly and deliberately, I leave to the discerning readers to decide.

Another interesting thing is that in Maha Bharatha, Sri Krishna himself did not kill Karna whereas Sri Rama did kill Vali in Ramayana. The reason is simple as it could have been yet another violation of battle ethics. (killing a person who is not directly fighting!). Arjuna killing Karna is perfectly justified as they were fighting each other! Again, whether this is coincidental or whether the God Almighty did this knowingly and deliberately, I leave to the discerning readers to decide.

Swasti! Peace be everywhere!